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Montagna, Nicola ORCID logo ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8170-2770> (2012) Labor, citizenship, and subjectivity: migrants' struggles within the Italian crisis. Social Justice: A Journal of Crime, Conflict & World Order, 39 (1) . pp. 37-53. ISSN 1043-1578 [Article]

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Labor, Citizenship, and Subjectivity: Migrants' Struggles within the Italian Crisis

Nicola Montagna*

Introduction

SOCIAL CONFLICT HAS BEEN A CONTINUOUS FEATURE OF ITALIAN SOCIETY OVER THE last few years. A recent survey documented that at least 17.7 percent of the population over the age of 18—about 9 million people—took part in some form of protest during 2011 (CENSIS 2012). An archipelago of conflicts has crossed the country, with actors mobilizing around various issues including the environment, political corruption, education reform, and other policies affecting local communities. The economic crisis and the government's economic policy, therefore, is not the only reason behind the recent protests in Italy—and is not the most prevalent. Mobilizations against the government's response to the crisis or the effects of recession have multiplied but remained fragmented, with a diverse array of actors—university students, school teachers, factory and rail workers, farmers, truck drivers, and precarious workers in the cultural industry—unable to coalesce and articulate a shared agenda. Moreover, unlike other countries like the USA, Spain, and Greece, the Occupy and Indignados movements have been weak and manifested themselves only on a few occasions, including the demonstration in Rome on October 15, 2011, and some actions organized by university students and precarious workers against the stock exchange and other financial firms in Milan.¹

In this context of crisis and diffused conflict, the struggles of migrant workers, both documented and undocumented, have also intensified. The recurrent storming of temporary detention centers across the country; the revolt of a hundred migrants against racist violence in Castelvoturno, Naples, after seven migrants were slaughtered by the local camorra on September 19, 2008; the uprising against the pogroms organized by the local population in Rosarno Calabro in January 2010;

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the strike on March 1, 2010; the numerous protests over the right to stay, freedom of movement, and labor rights; and the campaign for housing rights in several towns—all these struggles demonstrate the emergence of migrants as political actors, autonomously organized to make political claims. In these mobilizations migrant workers have usurped the “right to claim rights,” challenging the dominant notion of citizenship and enacting a new concept of it as a collective yet contingent practice (Isin 2010; see also Chimienti 2011; Chimienti and Solomos 2011; Oliveri 2012). These conflicts, particularly those analyzed in this article, have also shown the strong connection between citizenship and economic crisis. As we will see, under the international division of labor migrants are among the first victims of a weakened economy, and their exclusion from citizenship compounds their exploitation and their position as a “reserve army of labor” (Schierup and Castles 2011). Nonetheless, migrant activism was able to forge a new collective subjectivity, and although migrants are often subjected to trafficking and exploitation, they are also agents of transformation (Andrijasevic and Anderson 2009; Andrijasevic 2009; Ruggiero 2001).

This article² will document migrant conflicts within the crisis through an analysis of three cycles of contention from different parts of Italy. The first section will provide an overview of the economic context and of migrants’ incorporation into the country’s labor market. The second section will document the first general strike of migrants on March 1, 2010—“a day without us,” as they called it, recalling the similar successful protests that took place in some US cities in 2006. The cycle of protest for the regularization of undocumented migrants in Brescia, an industrial town in northern Italy, between September 2010 and July 2011 will be investigated in the second section. Finally, the third section focuses on the mobilization of seasonal migrant workers in the green district of Manduria in Puglia in the summer of 2011.

These cycles of protest have given the current economic crisis the shape and face (Melucci 1996) of a twofold crisis. On the one hand, these conflicts have shown that the current economic crisis is also a crisis of labor, determined by a declining demand for work and, simultaneously, the growing expansion of a dual labor market characterized by extreme precariousness, job uncertainty, salary volatility, and a lack of rights. On the other hand, migrant mobilizations have exposed the absence of political opportunities for migrants to voice their claims and the differential treatment of their rights,³ notwithstanding the growing numbers of migrant workers and their incorporation into both the formal and informal Italian economy. This closure of political opportunities has generated two main processes. First, these mobilizations have largely grown out of the autonomous initiative of migrant workers. Migrants had to constitute themselves as an autonomous political actor in order to make their claims. Second, the adoption of extreme forms of protests is a relational outcome, the only way for migrants to have their voice heard when other options do not exist or have been exhausted.

The Italian Crisis and Migrant Labor

When the Italian economy went into a crisis in 2009, it was already structurally fragile and stagnating. During the decade between 2001 and 2010 Italy recorded the worst production performance of all European Union (EU) countries, with an average annual GDP growth rate of 0.2 percent, compared with 1.1 percent for the Euro area (ISTAT 2012), and a disposable household income that decreased by 1.2 percent between 2003 and 2009 (OECD 2012). Social indicators of welfare further illustrate an overall weakness with some huge territorial differences: at the national scale, the relative poverty of Italian households was around 11 percent, but in the south—"the largest and most populated underdeveloped region in the Euro area," according to Mario Draghi, the former governor of Bankitalia—it stood at 22.7 percent (ISTAT 2011). A similar regional divide existed with regard to unemployment: whereas the national average was 7.8 percent—lower than in the rest of Europe—in the south it was 12.2 percent. This figure increases to 36 percent for youth unemployment, against a 25.4 percent nationally, and 40 percent for female unemployment, compared with a national average of 9.3 percent (ISTAT 2012).

With the onset of the crisis that saw the GDP fall to -5.2 percent between 2009 and 2010 and a projected loss of 2.5 percent in 2012, the economic condition of Italians and foreigners living in Italy worsened further. Material deprivation has increased, while unemployment has continued to rise. Almost 11 percent of the working-age population and one in three people aged 15–29 were out of work in mid-2012, whereas another third of young people were in temporary jobs, compared with an average of 13.4 percent among the total working-age population (ISTAT 2012). The economic condition of Italy's migrant population is even worse: average annual income is €12,481, more than €7,000 less than Italians' earnings, and half of all migrants earn less than €10,000 (Fondazione Leone Moressa 2012; exchange rate at the time of writing is €1=\$1.36).

One of the most serious effects of the economic crisis has been the dramatic increase of the Italian public debt, which continued to grow even in 2010 when macroeconomic conditions improved (ISTAT 2012). Therefore, some of the key measures adopted by successive governments between 2008 and 2012 were aimed at reducing the general government debt through the implementation of spending cuts. The Berlusconi government (May 2008 to November 2011), which did not have to bail out the banks, employed a number of spending reduction measures, promoting some reforms (including those of the university and pension systems) and some fiscal measures (including more controls to reduce tax evasion). The Monti government, which succeeded Berlusconi's under the pressure of the financial markets and European institutions, focused its action on structural reforms, for example in the labor market, and on a public spending review. Most government action focused on spending cuts; a decree aiming to stimulate growth and investments was passed only in the summer of 2012.

The economic crisis has had a huge impact on Italian society and particularly on its most vulnerable sectors, including migrant workers and their families. In recent years Italy has been one of the major countries of immigration in Europe, and migrants have become an important part of its society and labor market. The migrant population in Italy has grown from 1.2 million in 2001 to 4.5 million in 2011, 60 percent of whom are concentrated in the north of the country (ISTAT 2011; Cesareo 2011). As a consequence, the migrant workforce has also dramatically grown: from 724,000 in 2001 to 2,300,000 in 2011, representing some 10 percent of the working population and producing 12.1 percent of the GDP (Blangiardo 2011).

The migrants' experience in Italy is marked by geographical and occupational segregation, underemployment, lack of upward social mobility, gender discrimination (migrant women have lower rates of employment and are more likely to have an irregular income), lower pay, an average income significantly lower than that of Italians (Fondazione Leone Moressa 2012), discrimination in access to social rights (Ravelli 2011), social racism,⁴ and cultural discrimination. Moreover, migrant workers have been among the most penalized by the economic crisis. First, the demand for migrant workers, which had grown despite some fluctuations over the decade, fell to -39.9 percent between 2008 and 2011, compared with -16.7 percent for Italians. Second, unemployment rates have grown more rapidly among migrants than among the Italian population. Between 2005 and 2010 the unemployment of migrant men has doubled from 6.9 percent to 14.1 percent of the total unemployed population, while the unemployment of migrant women has risen from 9.2 percent to 15.6 percent (Fullin 2011). Third, migrants lose their jobs earlier and stay unemployed longer than Italians (Bonifazi and Marini 2011). Fourth, the occupational segregation that has always affected migrant workers has increased with the economic crisis. Whereas the first triennium of 2005-2010 was marked by an increase of skilled labor among both male and female migrants, the recession has put an end to this trend and exacerbated differences between men and women (Fullin 2011).

A consequence of these processes is that, although migratory flows have not dramatically decreased, migrant family members are leaving Italy and there has been a decline in family reunions, making migration once again a mainly male phenomenon.

"A Day without Us" and the National Strike of Migrant Workers

Within this context of economic incorporation and growing crisis, thousands of migrants and Italian workers took part in the first national strike of migrants on March 1, 2010, and demonstrated in at least 60 Italian towns to claim civil and labor rights. Anecdotal evidence reports that 300,000 people took part in the various demonstrations organized across the country (Mometti and Ricciardi 2011). The migrant workers strike was inspired by two similar events: the Great American Boycott day on May 2, 2006, during which migrant workers and their families

abstained from buying, selling, working, and attending school (Voss and Bloemraad 2011), and the “24 heures sans nous” that was also due to take place on March 1, 2010, in France. According to journalistic accounts, 20,000 people marched in Naples, 3,000 in Brescia, 15,000 in Milan and Turin, 1,000 in Bari, and more than 20,000 in Rome.⁵ The workforce of several dozen firms went on strike that day, and picket lines were organized at the market of Porta Palazzo in Turin, one of Europe’s biggest markets, where only 10 percent of the stalls opened.⁶

The relative success of the migrants’ strike cannot be explained without reference to a history of mobilizations against institutional racism. Since the big national demonstration of migrants during the anti-G8 protest in Genoa in 2001 and the promulgation in 2002 of the Bossi-Fini law, a restrictive and controversial law on migration, the struggle for migrant rights has become a central issue. On May 15, 2002, mobilizations took place across the country and a strike of migrant workers with high levels of participation took place in Vicenza, an area marked by immigration and politically dominated by the Lega Nord (Northern League), a right-wing anti-immigrants party. Other mobilizations followed, including two national demonstrations in Rome in 2004 and 2005. Then, on January 8, 2010, the revolt at Rosarno Calabro took place, involving hundreds of migrant workers, mostly seasonal farm laborers. This revolt, which was caused by the shooting of two migrants who were sleeping in a run-down factory, exposed the squalid living conditions and appalling exploitation of seasonal farmers, and the role of the *caporali* (gangmasters, see note 13 below) in it. It also accelerated the decision to take the initiative and call for a migrant strike. These mobilizations contributed to building a migrant subjectivity and establishing organizational networks at the local and national levels. Unsurprisingly, some of the towns where the strike was most successful were those with a longer tradition of struggles for migrant rights and of migrant self-organization.

The day of action thus relied on the organizational efforts of a network of migrants’ associations, Italian antiracist organizations, and some unions. However, the practical organization of the day took different forms according to the context—in particular, according to the relative strength of the migrants’ associations and their ability to influence the local unions (Mometti and Ricciardi 2011). In some places, including Bologna and Turin, the initiative came mostly from migrant workers and antiracist groups who involved the unions. In other contexts in which migrant activism is less rooted, the strike was organized by unionized migrants with the support of their unions but with little or no involvement of migrant rights associations. Finally, in yet other places the strike was first launched by migrants and antiracist associations, and only thanks to their pressures the unions decided to join the initiative. In Brescia, for example, the Associazione diritti per tutti (Rights for Everybody), composed by Italian and migrant activists, initiated the strike, which was then called by the unions. As an activist in Brescia argues, “the union branches have many unionized migrants who after many pressures managed

to convince the unions to take a position. Even in Brescia, the strike was at first heavily criticized by the unions as an ethnic strike and therefore counterproductive, but thanks to the unionized migrants, the unions changed their view” (interview with G., activist of the Associazione diritti per tutti). The focus of the nationwide strike was on issues related to work, the economic crisis, the economic contribution made by migrants, and the discrimination against them, but the emphasis varied across the country. Some groups linked to the institutional Left and the unions, including SOS Razzismo⁷ and ARCI,⁸ centered their initiatives on antiracism and on the opposition to the Bossi-Fini law, which had introduced residence contracts limiting the right to remain in the country to the duration of work contracts, turning migrants into guest workers.⁹ Other groups, particularly those linked to the antagonist Left, emphasized the economic crisis and its effects on the migrants’ lives, and argued that it had exposed migrant workers to a life of precariousness and invisibility. As a document issued by migrants in Bologna reads:

The economic crisis will make all workers redundant regardless of age or ethnicity. However, the residence contract in the Bossi-Fini law makes the crisis worse for migrant workers, who lose their residence permits if they lose their jobs. Migrant workers will be unable to renew their residence permits if they lose their jobs and their incomes do not reach the quota established by the law. (Mometti and Ricciardi 2011, 71)

While past cycles of migrant protest had mainly focused on civil rights (residence permits) and social rights (housing), “for the first time conflict has linked citizenship rights and working conditions. These were no longer abstract claims over civil rights. It was clear that migrants are a labor force that the law makes more manipulable” (interview with G., activist of the Associazione diritti per tutti). The day of action was thus more than a generic antiracist protest, and it rather affirmed the urgent necessity to reconnect citizenship and labor as the economic crisis was becoming more severe.

“We Are Here to Stay”: Irregular Migration, Citizenship, and Labor during the Crisis

On August 7, 2009, the center-right Italian government passed a law for the regularization of undocumented migrants who were already working in Italy. Unlike other generalized amnesties, this law was selective. It was aimed at a specific class of workers—the “colf e badanti,” housemaids and caregivers who provide assistance to elderly people—and excluded all other migrant workers. Those who applied to regularize their status had to pay a contribution of €500, plus an insurance fee based on the number of years of residence. This peculiarity gave way to several types of fraud. First, thousands of migrants employed as waiters, builders, and cooks, hoping to be regularized as domestic workers, started to look for possible

“employers” willing to sponsor their application in exchange for money. A survey carried out in Milan showed that the rates illegally asked for sponsoring migrants ranged from €500 to €8,400, with an average of €3,027. According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the total number of applications at the national level was 295,126, of which 215,255 (73 percent) were accepted, 44,824 (15 percent) were suspended, 32,376 (11 percent) were rejected, and 2,671 (1 percent) were waived. Most of these employers disappeared once they received the money and only a few undocumented migrants reported the fraud to the police, since they were illegally resident in Italy and under threat of deportation. Although it is impossible to calculate the total amount of money extorted from migrants, an approximate and prudent estimate that takes into account rejected applications and waivers and does not consider those who have paid and obtained a residence permit amounts to more than €106 million (Naga 2011). Second, and further complicating things, in February 2010 the government issued a revision of the law that prevented those who had been deported from applying for regularization. This meant that those undocumented migrants who received a deportation order after they had applied for amnesty saw their applications automatically rejected. While some reported these incidents to the authorities, a group in Brescia supported by the activists of the *Associazione diritti per tutti* and the social center Magazzino 47¹⁰ chose to protest. When this struggle began, on September 28, 2010, none of the actors involved—migrants, Italian activists, the local church, the local and national government—were aware it would be the beginning of the longest cycle of migrant workers’ struggles in Italy, lasting nine months, and would have international significance and involve some European institutions.

This cycle of protests went through different phases, each characterized by different dynamics, levels of community involvement, and institutional responses. The spark was ignited by a group of undocumented migrants from Egypt who called for a rally on September 28, 2010. As an activist puts it, “It was a group with a lot of energy. They just needed someone who could tell them what institutions to target.... A few of us went and followed them. They would say what to do. They just wanted us to show them where to go” (interview with A., activist of the social center Magazzino 47).

After the rally, which symbolically stopped in front of some local and national governmental buildings, the demonstrators occupied a small patch of green in front of the *prefettura*, the state’s office at the provincial level. The occupation lasted over a month and was eventually evicted on October 30, 2010. This first group of Egyptians was then joined by other nationalities, including Indians and Pakistanis, Moroccans, Tunisians, and Senegalese. They were not only the core but also the main actors of this initial phase of the protest. Contrary to what members of the local church and representatives of various institutions publicly claimed, migrants were those who decided over the protest’s repertoires, targets, and timings. In this

sense the Italian “community” was absent, with Italian activists only providing external support and advice.

Moreover, this phase of the struggle brought about a new social order, different from both the migrants’ societies of origin and Italian society. The occupied lawn was turned into a transnational space where a different cosmopolitan subjectivity, eclipsing national barriers and transcending religious identities, emerged. As one activist put it, “The more they were struggling and spending time together, the less the differences between different communities were perceived” (interview with S., activist of the social center Magazzino 47).

The general meetings played a crucial role in the construction of this cosmopolitan space. These involved all the migrants taking part in the protest; they were based on direct participation and no formal representation was allowed. Communication barriers were overcome by the use of Italian as common language. A contribution to this cosmopolitanism from below was also given by the meetings within more “homogeneous” linguistic groups, which were organized not by nationality but by spoken language. As one activist said: “These meetings hollowed out the national differences, which you could not really feel. If you like, the problem was practical, linguistic, and not one of national belonging. We couldn’t really talk about national communities” (interview with S., activist of the social center Magazzino 47).

Unlike other struggles of undocumented migrants that developed through networks of workplace and ethnic affiliation (Neilson 2009), this cycle of struggles generated a distinct cultural and political space wherein migrants gave up their accidental differences—that is, their ethnic affiliation—and replaced them with common objectives (cf. Gilroy 1993).

A second phase started with the eviction of the lawn and the subsequent occupation of a construction crane in the heart of town, not far from the town hall and in a logistically crucial place. The idea came from migrant activists who planned a demonstrative action to give visibility to their claims and put more pressure on the state institutions. Activists planned something short, a few hours long, in order to break through the wall of silence that local and national authorities had built around them.

So, although local and national governments, in both cases run by a right-wing coalition of the *Popolo della Libertà* (Freedom People) and the *Lega Nord*, wanted to keep the issue quiet, they obtained the opposite outcome. The occupation attracted impressive media coverage and gained the support of ordinary citizens. Some popular television shows sent their casts and gave the protest airtime, and even mainstream newspapers pressed institutions to provide answers rather than fuelling tensions between migrants and Italians and exacerbating the situation for political gain.¹¹ During this phase, migrants and activists were able to subvert the widespread image of the immigrant either as a victim or as someone who lives in Italy thanks to the generosity of Italian society. The extensive media coverage was a chance to draw attention to issues such as institutional and social racism,

the appalling labor conditions for migrants, and the fraud brought about by the regularization law. It was also an opportunity to demonstrate the migrants' willingness to fight and risk their lives to win rights. Large sectors of local and national public opinion were in solidarity with the migrants on the crane, seeing commonalities between the conditions of overexploitation and existential precariousness that foreign nationals faced and the difficulties Italian workers were confronting as a result of the economic crisis.

This was the harshest phase of the protest: the local authority shut down all dialogue, solidarity actions were brutally repressed, migrants' identification papers were constantly checked, and some of the protest leaders were deported. This situation brought about a wider grassroots involvement, while migrant participation declined. As one activist describes:

It was in this phase that Italians contributed more, as the climate changed and we all agreed that the migrants should expose themselves less. There were a lot of checks, people were stopped and searched ... [and] deported. All these things have left their scars. As a consequence, there has been a handover to the Italians, lecturers who organized teach-ins, kids who brought material, and so on. (Interview with A., activist of the social center Magazzino 47)

On November 6, 2010, ten thousand demonstrators marched through the town in solidarity with the migrants on the crane. On November 8 the institutions replied with violent police charges that cleared the solidarity gathering below the crane. Several people were arrested and some undocumented migrants were deported. Over the next few days two migrants left the crane, while solidarity initiatives multiplied across the province and the country, with demonstrations taking place in other towns, including Milan and Bologna. Finally, on November 15 the remaining four migrants made the decision to end their protest with the guarantee that they would not be expelled. With the evacuation of the crane the mobilization entered a third phase characterized by a variety of forms—legal appeals, petitions, rallies, occupation of public spaces, and meetings—until two rulings broke the deadlock. First, in April 2011 the European Court of Justice ruled that undocumented migration cannot be treated as a criminal offense. Second, in May 2011 the Consiglio di Stato, a constitutional body that evaluates the constitutionality of Italian laws, recognized the right of migrant workers to apply for amnesty even if served with a deportation order. For several thousand migrants, this opened the door to a residence permit. For those who were defrauded and could not demonstrate that they had applied for the amnesty, and whose employer had disappeared in the meantime, the door remained locked.

This cycle of protest has shown the increasingly close link between regularization, labor, and rights in a climate of economic crisis and tight immigration controls.

As a spokesperson of the protest puts it: “We have fought for the residence permit because it is everything in this country. It means work, health, rights. All depends on the residence permit” (interview with M., undocumented migrant and activist of the Associazione diritti per tutti). The residence permit is therefore seen as a starting point to claim a wider range of rights, to become visible, end exploitation, and terminate racism: “We are fed up with being treated as animals. We are exploited with lower salaries in the workplaces and looked upon with suspicion when we walk around or we are in a square and talk. We are not criminals, we just want the residence permit and it is our right” (*Corriere della Sera*, November 7, 2010). Claims have expanded and a protest for the permit to stay turned into a mobilization about visibility, social rights, dignity, recognition, and labor exploitation.

The Struggle of Seasonal Agricultural Laborers

In the early morning of July 30, 2011, a group of migrant farmworkers harvesting tomatoes in the fields near Nardò¹² refused to perform a new task ordered by a *caporale*¹³ that would have slowed their work down and led to a reduction in pay. They stopped working, went back to the farm where they were camped out, gathered other workers, and organized traffic blockades in the nearby streets. This was the start of the longest strike of migrant farmworkers in Italy, which continued with varying intensity and levels of participation for 10 days. At first the turnout was extremely high, and during the first two days 95 percent of the workers, around 400 people, blocked production, winning a slight pay increase and the regularization of the farmworkers’ contracts (Sagnet 2012, 67). For several days the migrants organized nighttime and early morning road blockades to prevent the gangmasters from transporting other migrants to the workplace. In the meantime, the solidarity machine was warming up, coordinated by the *Brigate di solidarietà attiva*, a national organization volunteering at the camp and providing migrants with support and information, while groups and associations mobilized to collect food and a “resistance fund” for the strikers. The press started to take an interest in Nardò. Journalists and reporters for the major television channels started to follow the strike, giving the event national coverage. At the same time, antiracist activists and union representatives attempted to involve the local institutions and to facilitate negotiations between migrant workers, firms, and their representatives. As the struggle continued and the negotiations between institutions and migrant workers got underway, landowners and gangmasters tried to counter the protest in various ways. Some of the spokespeople for the protest were threatened with death, and other foreign workers from different areas, some of them undocumented, were brought to the fields, while some landowners regularized the migrants’ status and slightly raised their pay. Moreover, whereas in the first days of the strike the common objectives of the struggle helped to soothe the tensions between national groups, as the days went by interethnic contrasts returned to the surface.

The strike was virtually over ten days after it began, although the ensuing mobilization and solidarity initiatives lasted for several weeks and led to some partial results, such as a decree outlawing *caporalato*, the regularization of some migrant workers, a pay increase, and greater public awareness of the working conditions of seasonal foreign workers. Unfortunately, as other struggles of seasonal workers in other Italian regions have recently shown (Oliveri 2012), *caporalato* and overexploitation have not ended with the strike, and the road to a complete fulfillment of the migrants' social and legal rights remains long.

This cycle of protest took place in the context of a structural and economic crisis of the agricultural industry. The southern farming system is too fragile and fragmented to compete in the global market; its firms are squeezed between the big distribution chains and some transnational corporations that produce and grow seeds. The mode of production is still backward, since over the last two decades local firms have mainly relied on underpaid and overexploited foreign labor rather than on innovation and rationalization through investments in technology. These structural difficulties have been accentuated by the economic crisis, which has increased competition among producers and brought down the prices of agricultural products. In 2011, a crisis in melon production and competition from Spain and Greece drove some firms out of the market.

Local firms have tried to minimize the impact of the economic crisis by reducing wages, increasing exploitation, and relying on informal relations of production (Ires 2011). This has been made possible in part by the massive deployment of foreign labor, which began in Apulia between the 1980s and the 1990s and progressively replaced the local labor force. Agricultural labor may be a multifaceted reality that is becoming more stable in some areas, but "seasonality and irregularity are the dominant characteristics of the employment of foreigners in agriculture" (Perrotta and Sacchetto 2012, 12). When the strike began, the working conditions in Nardò's countryside were extremely exploitative; gangmasters had almost total control over the migrants' work and their salaries. Salaries depended on a piecework-based system, and therefore on the amount of tomatoes the migrants were able to collect. Overall, the maximum average daily pay was €24.50 and a working day could last up to twelve hours. However, the real wage was much lower: migrants were charged by gangmasters for a number of services, including transportation and food, which brought the actual salary down to about €16. In addition, the gangmasters were responsible for the organization of labor and they kept the workers far away from the firms.

The living conditions were also very harsh. Five hundred migrants were sheltered in a rundown farm provided free of charge by the council. This is how Yvan Sagnet, the protest spokesperson and a migrant from Cameroon, describes the place: "It was hell. It was like being back to Africa. Sleeping in a tent, five hundred people with different cultural origins from sub-Saharan Africa and Maghreb.... All around just dirt" (Sagnet 2012, 57). Therefore, the strikers demanded not only regular

contracts, the end of the gangmaster system, and better pay, but also more doctors and better living conditions in the camp. In other words, their claims concerned the spheres of both production and reproduction—i.e., the way in which individuals and communities reproduce their living conditions.¹⁴

However, harsh working conditions and labor exploitation are common in the agricultural industry of southern Italy, and taken alone they do not explain the reasons for the strike in Nardò. The social composition of the strikers also played a fundamental role in the organization of this mobilization. Among those who took part in the strike in summer 2001 were many refugees who had recently fled their countries of origin. Most were Tunisians, Sudanese, and Ghanians, who formed roughly 70 percent of the total. Many Tunisians arrived after the fall of Ben Ali's regime and had temporary humanitarian permits, whereas the Sudanese had "subsidiary protection" or were refugees. Overall, 54 percent had humanitarian permits compared with 42 percent from the previous year, reflecting the major political changes related to the Arab Spring (Perrotta and Sacchetto 2012); 36 percent were in Italy with a residence contract. The strikers, therefore, belonged to two main groups: refugees escaping from wars and political persecution (from Sudan, Ivory Coast, and Libya, for example), and migrant workers who were following agricultural cycles across the country or were employed elsewhere in Italy, many of them union members in factories in the north who had lost their jobs as a consequence of the economic crisis. On the one hand, these migrants had higher expectations than those in the Nardò countryside and were not willing to accept the levels of exploitation found there. On the other hand, they had some experiences of activism either in their country of origin or in Italy.

The strike came out of this emerging collective subjectivity and was largely self-organized, with the unions and antiracist activists mainly providing external and logistical support. As Yvan Sagnet (2012, 67) puts it: "This was the first self-organized strike of foreign farmworkers, as other protests were episodic and targeted small agricultural entrepreneurs." The concentration of hundreds of workers in a single shelter facilitated communication, the organization of meetings, and collective decision-making. Perrotta and Sacchetto (2012, 36) observe: "While the gangmaster system may be strengthened by the physical, social, and political isolation of laborers, the Boncuri farm, managed by volunteers and activists, breaks this segregation and builds a place of socialization, exchange, and support." The ghetto was turned into a powerful organizational tool for struggle.

In conclusion, this strike erupted due to a combination of subjective and objective conditions: it was organized by actors with previous political experience and took place in the context of an economic crisis and a backward mode of production that used overexploitation as a way of maintaining profit. The strike also identified the link between the productive and social reproductive spheres. The migrants demanded a different organization of labor, regularization of work contracts, and also social rights, including health rights.

Concluding Remarks

This article has identified some of the forms that conflicts can assume during a crisis by focusing on migrants (undocumented, regularized factory workers, and seasonal laborers) and their struggles. Five main points can be made in relation to these cycles of protest. First, these struggles emerged from a context of economic crisis and illustrate the extent to which migrants pay the earliest and harshest costs of the crisis and of its governance. During a crisis the vicious cycle represented by denial of social and civil rights, unemployment and underemployment, and social marginalization worsens. Migrants are the first out of the labor market, they remain unemployed longer, and if employed their skills are systematically unacknowledged. While they become an easy scapegoat and their criminalization increases, they are systematically denied citizenship rights and their regularization becomes more difficult.

Second, these struggles were carried out by a political subjectivity that developed autonomously from the historical Left, particularly the unions, and in some cases, as in Nardò, from antagonist groups as well. This has not meant a lack of cooperation between migrants and the various articulations of the Left. Cooperation was in part based on the Italian nationals' superior knowledge of political, administrative, and legal mechanisms. However, this never developed into forms of delegation and subordination.

Third, these struggles revolved around production, social reproduction, labor, mobility, and citizenship, and showed the close links between these different spheres. This was particularly evident in the undocumented migrants' struggles on the crane in Brescia and in the farm laborers' strike. Whereas the Italian government's migration policies aimed to provide selective rights, refuse full citizenship, limit mobility, and treat foreigners as guest workers, the migrants' struggles aimed to recompose these different spheres with an awareness of the intimate linkages between them.

Fourth, these cycles of protest turned migrants into social actors and were therefore transformative in their scope. They aimed to rewrite pieces of migration legislation and to universalize social and civil rights. Therefore, the migrants who took part in these cycles of protests emerged as agents of political transformation (Touraine 2001) who rejected the subordinate role assigned to them by their status and reproduced by legal and political forces—though rejection took different forms for documented and undocumented migrants. These cycles of protest have forced the Italian government to address the issue of gangmasters and the national and international courts to revoke some aspects of the Italian migration policy, including the criminalization of undocumented migrants. They have exposed the controversial and political character of Italian legislation on migration and the conflicts between different layers of governance, both national and European. Looking at migratory experiences through migrant activism is also important for

its theoretical implications and because it allows researchers to move beyond the frame of victimization/proletarianization (Hatziprokopiou 2006). Although it remains true that migrants are exploited and socially marginalized, an overemphasis on these aspects of the migrants' identity and experience underestimate the extent to which they are autonomous beings capable of political action.

Finally, these episodes of struggle have generated forms of cosmopolitan spaces from below. National identities, religious faiths, and language barriers have been redefined and articulated at different levels in order to gain a common political and symbolic ground and to elaborate a shared agenda. In these conflicts two different spaces have been confronted: on the one hand, the nationalist space aiming to defend the national borders through the social marginalization of foreigners, their exploitation in the workplace, and the construction of dual legislation; on the other hand, the cosmopolitan, deterritorialized space in which participants share common class and status backgrounds and which is shaped by common objectives. Whereas the former is characterized by a retrenched identity, the latter has built a new metacultural identity, an identity that goes beyond particularities.

NOTES

1. For possible explanations of the absence of a movement like Occupy in Italy and the lack of generalized struggles, see Della Porta (2012), Negri (2012), and Raparelli (2012).

2. This article draws on 33 in-depth interviews with migrant workers (documented and undocumented) who took part in the cycles of protest described in these pages and with national activists and key informants (union members, priests, members of NGOs). The interviews were carried out between November 2010 and May 2012 and their narratives inform much of the empirical parts of this article. I use initials to maintain the interviewees' anonymity. Interviews have been integrated with periods of ethnographic observation at demonstrations, meetings, and social events and with documentary sources including printed leaflets, magazines, and electronic communications such as websites and e-journals. This article has also drawn on Italian newspapers and magazines, such as *Bresciaoggi*, *Corriere della Sera*, *La Stampa*, and the Italian edition of the *Huffington Post*; a radio station, Radio Onda D'Urto; three blogs, *lavoromigrante.altervista.org*, *meltingpot.org*, and *uninomade.org*; several activists' Facebook profiles; and videos available on YouTube.

3. During the crane struggle the mayor of Brescia said in an interview that migrants "have no rights, they have wishes. Wishes are widespread, but they cannot be turned into rights." Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IrbSU4U9Tt4>.

4. See, for example, the repeated attacks on Roma people denounced by the European Union.

5. Lisa Elena, "Immigrazione: fermi per un giorno," *La Stampa*, March 2, 2010.

6. Maria Teresa Martinengo, "E Porta Palazzo si è svuotata," *La Stampa*, March 2, 2010.

7. SOS Razzismo is a national organization founded in the late 1980s to contrast racism, xenophobia, and any form of discrimination.

8. ARCI (Italian Cultural Recreational Association) is a cultural and recreational national organization founded in 1957. It is a left-wing association and its local groups organize political, cultural, and social events across the country.

9. According to the residence contract, if a migrant loses his or her job and has not found another within six months, he or she also loses the residence permit. This made the right to remain even more precarious and posed a threat to migrants' work.

10. Self-managed social centers (*centri sociali autogestiti*) are empty buildings (former factories, warehouses, shopfloors, etc.) occupied by activists and transformed into “autonomous spaces” where recreational and political activities are organized (Montagna 2006).

11. See Massimo Mucchetti, “Da quattordici giorni sulla gru, è tempo di decidere,” *Corriere della sera*, November 10, 2010.

12. Nardò is a town of about 30,000 inhabitants in the province of Lecce, Apulia, whose main income is generated by tourism and agriculture, particularly the production of melons and tomatoes.

13. Agricultural work in most of southern Italy is organized by the *caporalato* (gangmaster system). Gangmasters are mostly migrant “workers” who supply casual labor through personal connections and word of mouth. They make a profit from each worker and are responsible for the exploitation of workers, breaches of employment and immigration laws, the trafficking of undocumented migrant workers, and tax evasion. The gangmaster system is illegal in Italy.

14. For a better understanding of this concept, see Brown, Dowling, Harvie, and Milburn, in this issue.

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